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Becoming Stateless: Historical Experience and Its Reflection on the Concept of State among the Lahu in Yunnan and Mainland Southeast Asian Massif

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This paper aims to contribute to James Scott's discussion of statelessness in "Zomia" by examining the realities of political autonomy and the concepts of state and kingship of the Lahu. During the nineteenth century, "kings" appeared among the Lahu in parts of southwest Yunnan. Indeed, the Lahu enjoyed political autonomy under their own kings before these were eliminated in the process of modern state formation and border demarcation in China and Burma. Messianic movements emerged among the Lahu after they became stateless. These movements stressed the need to redeem the lost states and kings throughout the course of the Lahu's modern history. In this respect, statelessness is not a timeless, quintessential attribute of the Lahu. Rather, they only became conscious of statelessness during the modern period. What this demonstrates is that the Lahu have never been conscious anarchists who chose to avoid kings and states. They possess their own original concepts of state and kingship, even though these differ from our conventional understanding, and the main theme of their historical experience and mythical accounts centers around their search for their own state and king.

Keywords: statelessness, Yunnan-Southeast Asian borderlands, Lahu, kingship, millenarianism

I Introduction

James Scott's recent work *The Art of Not Being Governed* (J. C. Scott 2009) is an excellent contribution to studies on the massif of mainland Southeast Asia and southwest China ("Zomia" in his terminology). Scott upholds that every aspect of social life of highlanders in this area can be seen as a conscious strategy to maintain distance from state power. He argues that their first priority was to avoid control from lowland states and that their

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social organization, shifting cultivation, illiteracy, and origin myths were designed to justify statelessness in order to meet their ultimate goal of anarchy.

His argument is a part of the recent trend in this field to present a non-state-centered perspective. Studies of this sort have appeared as opportunities for fieldwork have increased since China, Vietnam, and Laos (partly) opened their doors to foreign scholars.¹⁾ Such studies have led to a re-evaluation of certain social dynamics that hitherto remained hidden from the modern state perspective. James Scott's book has made advances in this respect.

The Lahu, a Tibeto-Burman speaking group, are distributed over a wide area that covers Upper Burma, northern Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, as well as their original land Yunnan. According to James Scott, they are one of the typically stateless peoples of "Zomia." Indeed, their consciousness of being stateless is both an important motif in their origin myth and a main driving force behind a series of messianic movements. However, whether statelessness reflects their consciousness is questionable. In this paper, I will present an alternative interpretation of their historical consciousness. I first discuss the Lahu's political autonomy in southwest Yunnan during the nineteenth century (Section II) and follow up by discussing arguments concerning the elimination of political autonomy in the course of China's building of a modern nation-state (Section III). Next I examine indigenous concepts of state and king, the origin myth that justifies stateless, as well as the messianic movements that search for "the lost book" of the Lahu (Section IV). Finally, in the concluding section, I present possibilities for viewing "Zomia" from an alternative perspective, which may open up ways of discussing the realities of states run by highlanders and their original concept of statehood.

II The "Lahu Age"

Emergence of the Lahu Autonomous Polities

After a long period of "missing links" in their ethno-history,²⁾ the Lahu (then known as Luohei 猓黑 or Kucong 苦葱 in Chinese documents) emerged in Chinese official records of the Yongzheng 雍正 period.³⁾ Qing officials promoted an image of the Luohei or Kucong as "unruly rebels," and the "Luohei rebels" appeared again in the Jiaqing 嘉慶 period

1) For example, see Giersch (2006) and Horstmann and Wadley (2006).

2) For the history of the Lahu before Qing, see "Lahuzu Jianshi" Bianxiezu (1986), Wang and He (1999), Zhengxie Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixian Weiyuanhui (2003).

3) *Dianyun Linianchuan*, Vol. 12, 621–624. See also *Gongzhongdang Yongzhengchao Zouzhe*, Vol. 7, 453–454, Vol. 20, 98 for details of the activities of the Luohei and Kucong.

when they were accused of disobedience to the lowland Tay (Shan) cawfaa or military native officials (*tusi* 土司) owing allegiance to the Qing emperor.

Demographic, economic, and religious factors contributed to the appearance of the “rebels.”⁴⁾ The first factor to consider is the expansion of the Han migrant population in southwest Yunnan and Upper Burma during the eighteenth century. According to the *Draft Comprehensive Gazetteer of Yunnan*, the population of Yongchang 永昌府 and Shunning 順寧府 Prefectures, where the majority of the Lahu resided, increased from 166,962 in 1736 to 660,452 in 1830⁵⁾ due to the huge influx of Han migrants. Highlanders were thus exposed to Han cultural influence. The spread of Mahayana Buddhism over the Lahu hills is a typical example (discussed below).

Rapid opening of mines in the Yunnan-Burma borderlands also attracted Han migrants. Reid (2004, 24) summarizes the migration of Han Chinese miners:

[M]inners migrated in large numbers into Yunnan, where there were reported to be 500,000 miners by 1800. The desire for further mining sites was not halted by any notional boundary of Chinese imperial control. The hills in the north of what are today Burma, Laos, and Vietnam held similar resources of copper, lead, iron, and silver as those of Yunnan. Chinese miners became far more numerous on all these frontiers in the eighteenth century, making deals as necessary with local or state power-holders.

Han mine owners maintained private armies and actively participated in local politics. The most prominent figures were Wu Shangxian 吳尚賢 of Maolong 茂隆 silver mine and Gong Li-yan 宮里雁 of Bolong (Bawdwin) 波龍 silver mine. The “Mian Kao 緬考” included in the *Dian Xi* of 1808 comments that these two mine owners were “most feared by surrounding barbarians” along the Yunnan-Burma borderlands during the eighteenth century. Another silver mine, Munai 募乃, was located in the center of the Lahu hills in today’s Lancang County 瀾滄縣, and was also managed by Han Chinese.⁶⁾

At the same time, the Qing dynasty introduced *gaitu guiliu* 改土歸流 policies, direct administration by imperial officials to replace indirect rule by military native officials (*tusi*) in the eighteenth century. This was actively implemented on the east bank of the Mekong (Lancang) river during the Yongzheng period under the initiative of Ertai 鄂爾泰, the governor-general of Yunnan and Guizhou. The abolition of Tay native military officials in Weiyuan 威遠 (present-day Jinggu 景谷) and Zhenyuan 鎮沅 during the 1720s was

4) See Ma (2004; 2007) and Takeuchi (2010) for details of Han immigrants to the Lahu hills, their impact on the local economy, and the transformation of ethnic relations, which eventually led to the creation of the Lahu semi-independent polities led by Han monks.

5) See *Yunnan Tongzhi Gao*, Vol. 56.

6) For details of the Chinese miners’ role in ethnic relations in the eighteenth-century Yunnan-Burma borderlands (including Munai), see Giersch (2006, 127–135).

followed by a series of uprisings by displaced Tay former aristocrats in coalition with other highlanders including the Lahu. The influx of Han Chinese migrants and the growing pressure of Qing's direct administration by the Qing created a "middle ground" (Giersch 2006), or a field of competition over political power and economic resources among the Han immigrants, lowland Tay, and surrounding highlanders in southwest Yunnan.

The second factor behind the emergence of the "Lahu rebels" was political unrest in Yunnan-upper mainland Southeast Asia during the eighteenth century. Mine owners, Han migrants, as well as local Tay cawfaa (Sën.Wii, Keng Tung, Mäng: Lēm 孟連, Sipsong Panna, Chiang Mai, etc.) actively participated in local politics along the Yunnan-Burma frontiers at the time of dynasty change in Burma and Siam. The new Siamese dynasty, Thongburi-Bangkok, ousted Burmese troops from Chiang Mai and made a vassal state of it. The newly appointed Chiang Mai king, Kawila, mounted military expeditions to Keng Tung and Sipsong Panna to bring back war captives to repopulate the Chiang Mai valley. The recently founded Burmese Konbaung dynasty also quickly reverted to an expansionist policy that targeted the Tay Shan polities in the northeast. It led to a triangular struggle among Burmese troops, Tay polities, and the leaders of the Han Chinese immigrants. All of this occurred in the aftermath of the 1766–69 Qing-Konbaung War.

The Tay polities were the main battlefields in all of these conflicts. In the course of such political turmoil, Tay cawfaa sometimes fought each other and sometimes banded together in accordance with complex marriage alliances. The Tay polities split into small factions and their political prestige in the region was severely damaged (*ibid.*, 97–124). Highlanders served at the frontline as spies, guides, or (un)reliable support forces for lowland cawfaa in inter-valley-state warfare. Their service strengthened the highlanders' powers of negotiation with lowland polities. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Lahu, who had formerly been subjects of the Tay cawfaa of Mäng: Lēm, Mäng Mäng 猛猛, etc., had already prepared to reject their suzerainty.⁷⁾

The third factor was Buddhism. Reportedly some Kucong who revered a Theravada monk⁸⁾ rebelled against Qing officials at Simao 思茅 during the early eighteenth century. However, it was Mahayana Buddhism that became dominant among the Lahu on the

7) The Lahu were no exception. Sir J. George Scott points out that the slow decline of the Tay valley states in regional politics is due to heavy demands from neighboring superpowers (Burma and China) and endless fighting among valley states or factions, as well as to "the advances of the Kachins" (J. G. Scott 1900, 281).

8) It was mentioned that this monk was a *mian seng* 緬僧 (*Gongzhongdang Yongzhengchao Zouzhe*, Vol. 20, 98). *Mian* literally means "Burmese" but in many cases this term simply serves as a synonym for the Theravada school of Buddhism. In this context, it is likely that he was a Tay.

western bank of the Mekong. According to Chinese publications on the Lahu, Mahayana Buddhism was initially brought into the Lahu hills during the eighteenth century by a Han Chinese monk from Dali 大理. Before that, the Lahu were organized under a religious-political leadership in which village priests were responsible for village administration. Under the influence of Buddhism, this system was transformed into integrated multi-village units headed by a *foye* 佛爺 or monk. The Lahu translated the Chinese term *fo* (fu) 佛, which literally means the Buddha (or Buddha images), as *G'ui sha*, meaning the supreme creator god. As Buddhism spread throughout the hills, the existing priest-centered village leadership was modified to worship *foye* as living Buddhas or man-gods (Yunnansheng Xingzheng Gongshu Minwei 1990, 344–346). A *Dafoye* (*Ta Fu Ye*) 大佛爺, or senior *foye*, appointed junior monks in each village under his control. This multi-village theocracy inspired by Mahayana Buddhism enabled the Lahu to claim equal status with the Theravada Buddhist polities in the lowlands.

The Heyday of the “Lahu Age”

The people of Dong Zhu (Tong Chu) 東主, where the Lahu Mahayana Buddhist tradition flourished in the nineteenth century, divide their history into two periods: the *Lahu co-e* (“Lahu Age”) and the *Heh pa co-e* (“Chinese Age”). The “Lahu Age” refers to the period up to the 1890s when their *fu* were active and enjoyed autonomy. The “Chinese Age” commenced with the introduction of direct administration by the Qing government in 1888.

Leading Lahu monks were known as *fu jaw maw* or “Buddha kings.”⁹⁾ The existence of such “kings” provides the basis for present-day Lahu claims that they once possessed their own king and state. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sir J. George Scott (then superintendent of the Shan States) reported the existence of an independent Lahu kingdom governed by a living Buddha, which he named the “Nan Cha Tong Chu Kingdom” after the location names of prominent monasteries (J. G. Scott 1900, 583). He wrote: “In the Nan Cha Tong Chu Kingdom of the La’hus there were thirty-six of these *Fu* and over them were set *Ta Fu Ye* or great Buddhas.” This kingdom was established by a mythical leader named Kyan Sit Fu, who “appeared mysteriously and ordered the construction of thirty-six *Fu-fang* or sacred (Buddhist) houses.” George Scott also noted that “when they were built he disappeared as suddenly as he came” (*ibid.*, 583–584). This mythical account matches the data from surveys conducted by the Communist government of China during the 1950s. Chinese government reports mention that the Lahu were once governed by a coalition of monks and monasteries called “36 *zun fo* 三

9) See below for the meaning of the term *jaw maw*.

十六尊佛 (respectful Buddhas)” (“Minzu Wenti Wuzhong Congshu,” Yunnansheng Bianji Weiyuanhui 1982, 14).¹⁰⁾ The coalition of monasteries was also known as the *wu fo* 五佛 (five Buddhas). The exact composition of the *wu fo* varies according to ethnographical authors,¹¹⁾ but most of them agree that Nan Zha (Nan Cha) 南柵 and Dong Zhu (Tong Chu) were central figures.

The first “Buddha king” to appear in Chinese historical sources is Tong Jin 銅金 (Buddhist name) or Zhang Fuguo 張輔國 (lay name), who was supposed to be the first Nan Zha Fo 南柵佛 (Nan Zha Buddha), in other words, the founder of the Nan Zha monastery. He was the son of a Han immigrant living in Mǎng: Lēm (Giersch 2006, 113), who taught martial arts and propagated Mahayana Buddhism in the Lahu hills (Yunnansheng Shuangjiang Lahuzu Wazu Bulangzu Daizu Zizhixian Difangzhi Biancan Weiyuanhui 1995, 857). He became notorious when he successfully instigated a Lahu rebellion against the lowland Tay polities of Mǎng Mǎng (Shuangjiang 雙江) and Mǎng: Lēm in 1799. This rebellion was eventually suppressed by Qing military intervention, though Tong Jin himself was released on the grounds that he was a monk with no political aspirations.¹²⁾

Tong Jin and his Lahu followers renewed hostilities against the Tay valley states in 1803 when they refused to pay tribute to the cawfaa of Mǎng: Lēm. The governor-general of Yunnan and Guizhou sent officials to mediate the dispute between the Lahu and the cawfaa. Qing officials finally settled the issue by obliging Tong Jin to return to secular life and by giving him a rank and title as a native official under the jurisdiction of Mǎng: Lēm, responsible for collecting tax on behalf of the cawfaa.¹³⁾ However, the problem was far from resolved since Zhang Fuguo (Tong Jin’s secular name), with the support

10) Details of the beginnings of the 36 monasteries differ a little from J.G. Scott’s version. According to this survey report, Wang Foye 王佛爺 came to the Lahu mountains to spread Buddhism in the last years of the Daoguang 道光 period (1821–51). Subsequently 36 monasteries were constructed as the community of followers grew.

11) For example, *Lahuzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha* lists Nan Zha Fo, Dong Zu (Dong Zhu) Fo 東祖佛, Wei Pan Fo 委盼佛, Guang Ming Fo 廣明佛, and Meng Ka (Mong Hka) Fo 勐卡佛 (“Minzu Wenti Wuzhong Congshu” Yunnansheng Bianji Weiyuanhui 1982, 72). The *Lahuzu Jianshi* version includes Ba Ka 坝卡, Nan Zha, Dong Lang 東朗, Dong Zhu, and Bang Zang 邦藏 (“Lahuzu Jianshi” Bianxiezhu 1986, 35). According to *Simao Shaosu Minzu*, the *wu fo* consisted of Nan Zha Fo, Man Da Fo 蠻大佛, Dong Zhu Fo, Wei Pan Fo, and Guang Ming Fo (Yunnansheng Xingzheng Gongshu Minwei 1990, 344). *Lahuzu Wenhushi* lists Nan Zha Fo, Wang Foye Fo 王佛爺佛, Man Da Fo, Dong Zhu Fo, and Meng Ka (Mong Hka) Fo (Wang and He 1999, 200). *Lahuzushi* provides yet another version of the *wu fo*, comprising Nan Zha Fo, Wang Foye Fo, Meng Nuo Fo 勐糯佛, Dong Zhu Fo, and Wei Pa Fo 尾帕佛 (Zhengxie Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixian Weiyuanhui 2003, 76). Fang Guoyu 方國瑜, a Chinese historian and ethnologist, who travelled in the Lahu hills in 1930, published a list of former *wu fo* that included Dang Jiao Fo 當角佛, Xian Guan Fo 賢官佛, Yong Pa Fo 永怕佛, Qing Zhang Fo 慶章佛, and Dong Zhu Fo (Fang 2008, 111).

12) *Qing Renzong Shilu*, Vol. 65, 4–5.

13) *Xincuan Yunnan Tongzhi*, Vol. 176, 13–14.

of his Lahu followers, remained disobedient to Mǎng: Lēm and even continued to expand their territory by secretly collecting *hanjian* 漢奸 (Han traitor) troops¹⁴⁾ and attacking nearby Tay valley states. In the end the governor-general decided that he could tolerate their behavior no longer and ordered the Tay cawfaa of southwest Yunnan to deploy troops to attack them.¹⁵⁾ The Lahu “Buddha Kingdom” was destroyed in 1813; however this was only the beginning of the history of autonomy of the Lahu hills.

Yong Bao 永保 and Wu Dajing 烏大經, Qing officials dispatched to settle the Lahu-Mǎng: Lēm dispute in 1803, described how the Lahu found demands from the cawfaa so unreasonable and arbitrary that they wished to be governed by Tong Jin instead of the cawfaa, or else to pay taxes directly to the governor-general. They commented that the Lahu’s attitude toward Tong Jin was “extremely obedient” and that “Tong Jin claims that he is a monk, but, as seen by the reverence shown to him by the people, in reality he is nothing less than a Tibetan Lama in yellow robe.”¹⁶⁾ These passages prove that he reigned over the Lahu as an absolute monarch. A British colonial official made a similar observation about the nature of the Lahu *fu jaw maw* in the twentieth century (see below).

After the defeat of Tong Jin and his Nan Zha monastery, the center of the Lahu Buddhists moved southward to Dong Zhu,¹⁷⁾ where Wang Foye 王佛爺 and his disciple San Fo Zu (Sha Fu cu, A sha Fu cu, A teh Pu cu) 三佛祖 served as the *fu jaw maw*. Wang Foye was a Han Chinese monk fluent in the Tay, Wa, and Lahu languages (Wang and He 1999, 196–197). He emerged as a prominent figure among the Lahu after the decline of Nan Zha’s power. He claimed to be a *huo fo* 活佛 (living Buddha) and appointed 12 monks as headmen, who each administered the multiple villages under his jurisdiction (“Minzu Wenti Wuzhong Congshu” Yunnansheng Bianji Weiyuanhui 1982, 95–98). Since Wang Foye is also said to have been a founder of the “36 monasteries,”¹⁸⁾ so Kyan Sit Fu, who appears in J.G. Scott’s historical description above, might be another name for him.

After the death of Wang Foye around 1850 (Wang and He 1999, 197), his disciple San Fo Zu succeeded him as the most influential monk among the Lahu. Residing in Dong Zhu, San Fo Zu preached round Xia Gaixin 下改心 (in present-day Lancang). Later, in 1874, he moved his base to Mǎng Ka (Ximeng 西盟) where he gradually gained a strong following among the indigenous Wa people after having conquered them (Yunnansheng

14) These Han troops were probably recruited from among the coolies working at the Munai silver mine (located at the center of the Lahu hills in present-day Lancang), which was closed in 1815.

15) The background to this military operation is well described and analyzed by Giersch (2006, 113–115).

16) *Xincuan Yunnan Tongzhi*, Vol. 176, 13–14.

17) A series of local monks succeeded Tong Jin as abbots of the Nan Zha monastery but none had his charisma (Zhengxie Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixian Weiyuanhui 2003, 265).

18) See footnote 10).

Ximeng Wazu Zizhixianzhi Biancan Weiyuanhui 1997, 261, 395; Yunnansheng Xingzheng Gongshu Minwei 1990, 344).

The *Lahu Cultural History* relates that the Dong Zhu monastery was destroyed in 1874 during the Panthay rebellion (Wang and He 1999, 198). However it seems that Dong Zhu recovered quickly. During the 1880s, Dong Zhu Da Fofang 東主大佛房 (Dong Zhu Great Monastery) was listed among the “*tucheng* 土城 (native fortifications)” by Cen Yuying 岑毓英, the incumbent governor-general of Yunnan and Guizhou (Cen 2005, 375).

Li Tongming (Mäng Hka Fu/Meng Ka Fo) 李通明, the husband of San Fo Zu's daughter, succeeded to the position of Mäng Hka Fu (Meng Ka Fo or Ximeng Fo) when his father-in-law San Fo Zu died in 1888.¹⁹⁾ At the turn of the century, Li Tongming was the sole remaining “Buddha king” in the Yunnan-Burma borderlands. Li Tongming appears in J. G. Scott's *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States* as the *Ta Fu Ye* of Mäng Hka who inherited the tradition of the Nan Cha Tong Chu Kingdom. He observes that “[t]he name *Ta Fu Ye* and the sacred character of its bearer, as has been said, suggest the *Lamas* of Tibet, or rather the *Dalai Lama*, for the ordinary *Lama* is nothing more than a Buddhist monk” (J. G. Scott 1900, 584). However, this tradition did not last long. After Li Tongming's death in 1901, Ca sheh 扎謝 served as regent to Li's young son. Promoted from the position of a private servant in the Li family, Ca sheh had never been ordained as a monk and, naturally enough, had not received a Buddhist education. Reportedly the tradition of Buddhism in Ximeng (Mäng Hka) declined during his period (Yunnansheng Ximeng Wazu Zizhixianzhi Biancan Weiyuanhui 1997, 396).

Ca bo *taiye* 扎布太爺 was a contemporary of San Fo Zu. After an apprenticeship in Nan Zha, he established a monastery in his village Meng Nuo 勐糯 and served as the abbot or *foye*. His prestige grew as the number of his followers swelled. He then returned to secular life to marry the daughter of a village headman and ruled 16 subordinate villages. The headmen of the villages under his control paid tribute to him annually. He had formed alliances with San Fo Zu and Nan Zha Fo, and together they were known as the “*san fo* 三佛” (three Buddha [kings]) in the late nineteenth century (Yunnansheng Xingzheng Gongshu Minwei 1990, 350–351).

Wei Xiang 魏相, a founder of Man Da Fu 蠻大佛, was also listed as one of the five *wu fo* of the Lahu even though he was a Wa. Wei Xiang received training from Nan Zha Fo before he went to Dali for further Buddhist education. Returning to Man Da, he established a monastery and, by virtue of his position as the *Ta Fu Ye*, had 20 subordinate

19) This indicates that both monks San Fo Zu and Li Tongming were married. The fact that this apparent violation of the Buddhist precept did not undermine their religious charisma reflects some degree of transformation of original Buddhism (see Du 2003).

abbots and 360 lesser monks under his jurisdiction (Yunnansheng Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixianzhi Biancan Weiuyanhui 1996, 152). The *Newly Compiled Comprehensive Gazetteer of Yunnan (Xincan Yunnan Tongzhi)* commented that he was one of the three outstanding leaders of southwest Yunnan during the nineteenth century, the other two being the Wa Gourd King (*Huluwang* 葫蘆王) and the cawfaa of Mäng: Lëm.²⁰⁾ The emergence of the authority of Man Da Fu among the local Lahu and Wa made them reject submission to Shang Yun 上允, a vassal Tay state of Mäng: Lëm (Wang and He 1999, 197–198).

Apart from the “Buddha kings” mentioned above, there were more secular native leaders active in the Lahu hills during the later half of the nineteenth century. The *Newly Compiled Comprehensive Gazetteer of Yunnan (Xincan Yunnan Tongzhi)* mentioned the emergence of a galaxy of native forces in the Lahu hills during the Guangxu 光緒 period (1875–1909). This group comprised Zhang Dengfa 張登發 (Zhang *taiye* 張太爺), the son of a Han migrant; Shi Zhaolong 石朝龍, Shi Zhaofeng 石朝鳳, Shi Tingzi 石廷子, Li Zhilong 李芝隆—all of whom were immigrants from Weiyuan 威遠 on the east bank of the Mekong; and Li Zhaolong 李朝龍, a migrant from Pu’er 普洱.²¹⁾ Later Zhang Dengfa became the target of a military expedition by the Qing army, while the other emerging native leaders were given titles as military native officials by the Qing government.

Zhang Dengfa succeeded his father Zhang Bingquan 張秉權, who established himself as a semi-independent ruler of Shang Gaixin 上改心 (today’s Shuangjiang County) (Yunnansheng Shuangjiang Lahuzu Wazu Bulangzu Daizu Zizhixian Difangzhi Biancan Weiuyanhui 1995, 857–858).²²⁾ Zhang Bingquan is reported to have been the son of Zhang Fuguo (Tong Jin) (*ibid.*, 806).²³⁾ Ensnared in the Shang Gaixin hills, Zhang Bingquan and Zhang Dengfa rejected the overlordship of the cawfaa of Mäng Mäng and continuously occupied villages from the territories of Mäng Mäng and other surrounding Tay valley states. They established a centralized hierarchy of administration with the *jaw maw* at the top. The *jaw maw* divided his territory into tax-collecting zones and appointed a *changye* 掌爺 to supervise each village cluster (Shuangjiang Lahuzu Wazu Bulangzu Daizu Zizhixian Minzu Shiwu Weiuyanhui 1995, 40–41, 264–265). Zhang’s hill dynasty overwhelmed the Mäng Mäng cawfaa and encroached on his territory despite repeated warnings from Qing officials in 1883–84.²⁴⁾

20) *Xincuan Yunnan Tongzhi*, Vol. 176, 24.

21) *ibid.*

22) According to *Lahuzu Shi*, Zhang Bingquan was a younger brother of Zhang Dengfa’s father (Zhengxie Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixian Weiuyanhui 2003, 69).

23) *Lahuzu Shi* remains silent on this point. It mentions nothing about the relationship between Zhang Fuguo and Zhang Bingquan.

24) *Fu Dian Zouyi*, Vol. 1.

Among other native leaders of the Guangxu period, Li Zhilong and the Shi brothers (Zhaolong and Zhaofeng) are credited in the *Draft of the Continued Comprehensive Gazetteer of Yunnan* (*Xu Yunnan Tongzhi Gao*) with rendering military assistance to the Qing during the Panthay rebellion.²⁵⁾ This corresponds to the fact that Simao was recovered by Qing troops in 1865 with military assistance from local reinforcements from the Lahu hills (Yunnansheng Simao Xian Difangzhi Biancan Weiyuanhui 1993, 371). They may have been serving as pro-Qing militia even before being granted official titles as native military officials.

III Decline of the “Lahu Age” and the Aftermath

Collapse of Autonomy

The period of flourishing semi-independent “Buddha kings” and other secular leaders came to a close at the end of the nineteenth century during the course of the transformation of the Qing Empire into a modern state.

The sudden elimination of the kingdom of Burma in 1885 and the British annexation of Upper Burma in the following year caused serious problems for Qing officials. They had to defend Yunnan from the British, but nobody knew exactly where Yunnan ended and Upper Burma began. Tay (Shan) valley states lay between China and Burma, and the question of sovereignty over these states was an extremely complex one. Some of these states were vassal states of Burma, others were ruled by military native officials (*tusi*) appointed by China, and some states paid tribute to both.²⁶⁾ As a result, the British claimed territorial rights over some of the Tay military native officials in Yunnan. Indeed, in the demarcation of the territory of British Burma, the British set extreme eastern limits to Burma’s tributary states and “claimed the following eastern tributary states as falling within Ava’s domains and having paid tribute to her: Hsenwi (Sĕn.Wii), Kokang, Kungma (Mäng: Küng), Monglem (Mäng: Lĕm), Kenghung and the Lahu hills between the last two” (Saimong 1965, 275). Thus, for the Qing it was of vital importance to prove that the valley states in question were in fact “Chinese” local administrative units.

Here lay another serious problem. The administrative power of Tay cawfaas was confined to the small valleys scattered throughout southwest Yunnan, and their sovereignty over the hills surrounding such valleys was at most nominal. Indeed, as we have seen, some of the Lahu leaders were even hostile to the valley cawfaas. In short, the

25) *Xu Yunnan Tongzhi Gao*, Vol. 98.

26) See Saimong (1965) for an analysis of this complex situation.

system of indirect administration in which native officials ruled over feudal territory on behalf of the Qing court had failed.

The Qing policy of securing sovereignty over territory on the Yunnan-Burma frontier was to encroach on the domains of weakened Tay valley states and grant native official (*tusi*) titles to nominally subordinate upland leaders. This policy was originally intended to target the Kachin (Jingpo), but was also applied to the Lahu.²⁷⁾ Pro-Qing figures among the Xia Gaixin (present-day Lancang) Lahu such as Li Zhilong, Shi Zhaolong, Shi Zhaofeng, etc., were given titles of lower rank such as native lieutenants (*tugianzong* 土千總), native second lieutenants (*tubazong* 土把總), native second captains (*tushoubei* 土守備), and native brigade vice-commanders (*tudusi* 土都司), in 1886 (Fang 1987, 882). This measure was aimed at isolating Zhang Dengfa, who was most hostile to Qing authority. In the following year, Cen Yuying, the governor-general of Yunnan and Guizhou, sent troops to attack the stronghold of Zhang Dengfa, with newly appointed Lahu native officials assisting in the operation. The Qing army eventually killed Zhang Dengfa and occupied his territory. After the completion of this operation, the Qing established Zhenbian sub-prefecture (*ting*) 鎮邊直隸廳 as an organ to administer directly the new territory in the Lahu hills in 1888.²⁸⁾

In a report of the victory of the military expedition submitted to the emperor, the governor-general of Yunnan and Guizhou, Cen Yuying (2005, 403), summarized the political development of the Lahu hills throughout the nineteenth century very simply as “endless rebellion (*lushi panluan* 屢世叛亂).” This reveals a huge gap between the statements by Qing officials and Lahu perceptions of themselves. From the viewpoint of Qing officials, the “Lahu Age,” in which the Lahu resisted submission to the Qing, was simply a rebellion against a legitimate state power.

The forces of the five “Buddha kings” (*wu fo*) led by Dong Zhu and Mǎng Hka continued to resist surrendering to the Zhenbian sub-prefecture. San Fo Zu of Mǎng Hka died in 1888, the same year as the Qing started to directly administer the Lahu hills (Yunnansheng Ximeng Wazu Zizhixianzhi Biancan Weiyuanhui 1997, 261). Three years later, the forces of the “barbarians of the five monasteries (*Wu Fofang Yi* 五佛房夷)” attacked the Zhenbian army.²⁹⁾ Since this movement was centered around Dong Zhu and Mǎng Hka, Qing troops destroyed the Dong Zhu *Fofang*. Meanwhile Li Tongming surrendered to the Qing and was appointed as the Ximeng *tumu* 西盟土目, a low-ranking native official (*ibid.*, 395–396; Yunnansheng Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixianzhi Biancan

27) *Yunnan Tongzhi*, Vol. 114.

28) *Xincuan Yunnan Tongzhi*, Vol. 176, 25.

29) *Xu Yunnan Tongzhi Gao*, Vol. 84.

Weiyuanhui 1996, 462). The entire Lahu hills in Yunnan then came under the control of the Qing and thus ended the “Lahu Age.”

However, the Lahu polities should not be understood in the modern sense of international relations, which are based on the notion of sovereign states. The Lahu polities were nominally under the suzerainty of the Tay valley states; hence, they were vassals from the official viewpoint of Chinese emperors and Burmese kings. In addition, some Lahu “Buddha kings” were subordinate to the Wa chiefs as well. Ca bo *taiye* is reported to have refused to pay tax to a neighboring Wa chief and to have established an alliance with the Wa on equal terms. This indicates that the Lahu in that area paid tax to the Wa and therefore were subordinate to them before the time of Ca bo (Yunnansheng Xingzheng Gongshu Minwei 1990, 350–351). San Fo Zu (and his successor Li Tongming) conquered Mǎng Hka (Ximeng) and ruled over the Wa living there. However, San Fo Zu and Li Tongming’s “kingdom” still remained subordinate to a neighboring Wa chief named Sung Ramang, paying annual tribute to him (J. G. Scott 1901, 360). This is an important point for understanding the local concepts of state and kingship, which are different from present-day notions of modern nation states (discussed below).

Zhenbian sub-prefecture was proof that the Lahu hills were under Qing administration, so the British abandoned the annexation of Zhenbian as well as Mǎng: Lēm and Sipsong Panna.³⁰⁾ Finally both Qing China and British India agreed on the demarcation of the Yunnan-Burma border in 1894, with the exception of some parts of the Wa area.³¹⁾ The transformation of the pre-modern regional order into a world governed by the principles of modern international relations eliminated any possibility of the Lahu surviving with their own country. Nonetheless, their concept of state and kingship persisted and was expressed in the repeated religious movements and rebellions that arose thereafter.

Emerging Messianic Movements

Studies on Lahu religious history agree that the messianic movements, which started at the end of the nineteenth century, originated from a prophecy by San Fo Zu. According to Gordon Young, the prophetic tradition can be traced to a message that San Fo Zu left on his deathbed in 1888 in which he instructed the Lahu to “burn the beeswax candles and joss-sticks, that the day might soon come when the Lahu people will receive their enlightenment from God” (G. Young 1962, 11).

30) Actually the British government sent a series of delegations to Mǎng: Lēm, Sipsong Panna, and Mǎng Hka (Ximeng) to ask for their submission (Saimong 1965, 200–288; Mitton 1936, 187–189).

31) Mǎng Hka (Ximeng) was included in these unsettled areas. For details of border demarcation, and debates between China and British India over the legal status of Mǎng: Lēm and Sipsong Panna, see Saimong (1965, 275–291).

Paul Lewis, a Baptist missionary and anthropologist, argues that San Fo Zu was also the founder of Lahu millenarianism: “Messianic movements among Lahus in Burma have been going on for many years. The Lahus say it really started with Sha fu cu, and the power has been handed down from one to the other” (Lewis 1970, 88).

Indeed, the unsuccessful rebellion of the “barbarians of the five monasteries” against Zhenbian sub-prefecture in 1891, in which San Fo Zu’s son-in-law played a central role in the alliance with the Dong Zhu Fo, was a direct result of this prophecy.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the longing for a messiah became widespread among the Lahu in Yunnan and even among those in the Shan States, Burma. Antidel, another Baptist missionary at Keng Tung, wrote of such enthusiasm. The Lahu there widely believed that:

God, Himself, was to appear and reinstate them supernaturally. A false leader has here and there appeared claiming to be God and urging the people to abandon the “old” and take up the “new,” to obey him and when the time comes he would “manifest” himself and exert his supernatural powers, when all manner of blessings—chiefly temporal—should be heaped upon the people with no effort on their part; they would rule over their present oppressors, sickness and, of course, death, would be no more. Several of these false prophets have had a considerable following. (Antidel 1911, 35)

Prophetic uprisings by the Lahu arose continuously in Yunnan, the Shan States, and eventually in Thailand.

In 1903, a group of the Lahu of Mǎng Mǎng (Shuangjiang) led by “*yaoren* 妖人” (a miraculous person) and “*xianren* 仙人” (probably an immortal, unworldly person) revolted against the cawfaa of Mǎng Mǎng, but was suppressed by Qing forces.³² During the rebellion, the people gathered at a *Fo-fang* (monastery) for New Year dancing, and “magical water” was distributed by the leaders before the uprising.

Two years later, *The News* (a monthly journal of the American Baptists) reported that among the Lahu of Keng Tung, “one man claims to be a messianic king, that he is to give immortality to all, and that there will be no more wars” (W. M. Young 1905a, 11).

In 1918, the Lahu brothers Li Long 李龍 and Li Hu 李虎 of Yunnan instigated their brethren to rise up against usurious practices and government officials (Yunnansheng Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixianzhi Biancan Weiyuanhui 1996, 560–561). One Lahu leader, who joined the insurrection after visiting Dong Zhu and other *Fo-fang*, then claimed to be God (Zhengxie Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixian Weiyuanhui 2003, 85). The people revolted

32) *Shunning Fuzhi*, Vol. 17. For details, see Shuangjiang Lahuzu Wazu Bulangzu Daizu Zizhixian Minzu Shiwu Weiyuanhui (1995, 45–48).

with the slogan “Our lord has appeared!” This rebellion spread all over the Lahu hills in Yunnan before being suppressed by Yunnan provincial troops (“Minzu Wenti Wuzhong Congshu” Yunnansheng Bianji Weiyuanhui 1982, 80–81).

Messianic movements have also arisen among the Lahu in Burma and Thailand.³³⁾ Lewis described one instance as follows:

In 1934 the Lahu “prophet” named Ma heh G’ui sha raised an army to fight the British. The latest leader of significance to Lahus in Thailand is Maw na pa, or sometimes called Paw ku lon, living just across the border from Thailand. In 1958 he sent word that no Lahu was to live any further south in Thailand than Fang. Those who would come up to live in Burma, he said, would have “everlasting food and drink,” and thus many villages went up there. Many of them have become discouraged and returned to Thailand. (Lewis 1970, 88)

Another example is that of Maw na to bo, or Maw na pa, who was one of the warlords in the ethnic insurgency in Burma. He purportedly established his army by collecting money from ordination ceremonies for religious specialists under his rule, and proclaimed his territory a Lahu *mvuh mi* (state). His claim attracted the Lahu in Burma, who were under strong pressure from the government army, Shan separatist armies, and Burmese Communist Party guerrillas, as well as his brethren who suffered oppression under the military rule of the ex-KMT troops in the hills of northern Thailand (Sombat 2002).

Till today the Lahus’ quest for a new charismatic leader has not ended. Once a powerful man with mysterious power appears, rumors spread across national boundaries immediately. A good example is Khruba Bunchum, a Thai charismatic monk living near the Golden Triangle (Thai-Lao-Burmese border).³⁴⁾ His Lahu followers consider him to be a reincarnation of San Fo Zu and Maw na to bo (Kataoka 2007).

All these cases indicate that the messianic movements of the Lahu should be viewed as a reaction to serious deprivations suffered after the demise of the “Lahu Age” and incorporation into modern nation states, rather than as an everlasting essential feature of highlanders’ identity.

IV The Making of “Statelessness”

State and Kingship

The Lahus’ claim that they once had kings and countries of their own actually has some

33) See Walker (1974) for a brief summary of such movements up to the 1970s.

34) Cohen (2000) mentions Bunchum’s movement, which crosses national and ethnic boundaries, and the Lahu’s involvement in it.

grounds. If so, what are the indigenous concepts that correspond to the notion of country (or state) and king? The Lahu words *mvuh mi* and *jaw maw* refer to “country” and “king” respectively.

Lewis, in his *Lahu-English-Thai Dictionary*, defines *mvuh mi* as “a country, a nation” (Lewis 1986, 232).³⁵ However, this term sometimes denotes territories other than modern nation states. For example, Lancang Lahu Autonomous County in present-day Yunnan is called Lancang Lahu Mvuh mi. The Shan States within Burma and the Wa substate in the Shan States are called Pi chaw (Shan) Mvuh mi and A va (Wa) Mvuh mi respectively. Village clusters can also be called *mvuh mi*.³⁶ Regardless of the issue of sovereignty, the term *mvuh mi* can be used to denote almost all geographical territories; however, while it is true that *mvuh mi* does refer to a country or state, it should be noted that it has a wider range of meaning than these English terms.

Jaw maw appears as a translation for “lord” and “ruler” in Lewis’ dictionary (*ibid.*, 154). Heads of state, monarchs, and presidents are all referred to as *jaw maw*. Like *mvuh mi*, the term *jaw maw* also carries a much broader meaning than the simple notion of conventional kings of independent states. Rulers subordinate to higher authority such as the cawfaa of Mäng: Lēm and Keng Tung are known as *jaw maw*. Some heads of local administrative units are also referred to as *jaw maw*. This term is used for the head of Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, district heads under his jurisdiction, and some district heads and warlords in Burma and Thailand.

In Chinese, *jaw maw* (*jao mo*) is translated as *taiye* 太爺, supreme ruler of the Lahu. One example of a Lahu leader who held the *taiye* title is Zhang Dengfa (Yunnansheng Shuangjiang Lahuzu Wazu Bulangzu Daizu Zizhixian Difangzhi Biancan Wei yuanhui 1995, 806). A close reading of materials mentioning former Lahu leaders reveals other instances. Li Zhilong, a pro-Qing native leader and contemporary of Zhang Dengfa, “proclaimed himself a king and was called San Lao *taiye* 三老太爺 or San Laohu 三老虎” (Yunnansheng Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixianzhi Biancan Wei yuanhui 1996, 461). Ca bo *taiye* in Meng Nuo (see above) was another *jaw maw* among the Lahu Buddhists during the nineteenth century.

Apart from Ca bo himself, as already mentioned above, *fu* in the nineteenth century were generally called *fu jaw maw* or “Buddha kings.” One such king was “*Ta Fu Ye* (*Dafoye*)” of “Nan Cha Tong Chu (Nan Zha Dong Zhu) Kingdom” described in George Scott’s report. Actually, Wang Foye and San Fo Zu were accorded the *taiye* title as well

35) Literally, the term means “heaven (*mvuh*) and earth (*mi*).”

36) Meh na hko, a village cluster in Thailand (Chiang Rai province, Mae Suai district), where I conducted fieldwork for three years, is called Meh na hko Mvuh mi.

(Wang and He 1999, 195–200; Zhengxie Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixian Weiyuanhui 2003, 269).

There is evidence that even bandit leaders can be enthroned as kings in the people's memory. Ca na 扎那, a bandit leader on the east bank of the Mekong who fought against direct administration by the Qing at the end of the eighteenth century, was posthumously given the title of "Lahu King (*Luohei Wang* 猓黑王)" (Zhengxie Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixian Weiyuanhui 2003, 54–56).

In the tradition of messianic movements after San Fo Zu (that is after the end of the "Lahu Age"), we still come across many kings or *jaw maw* in early twentieth-century accounts. In 1904 a mass conversion to Christianity occurred in Keng Tung when the arrival of a Christian missionary was interpreted as a fulfillment of San Fo Zu's prophecy (see below). The American Baptist missionary was granted the "Squatter Sovereignty right to the territory" by the Lahu.³⁷ Although the Lahu term for the English translation "Squatter Sovereignty" was unfortunately not given in the missionary correspondence, it is quite likely that the term originally used was *jaw maw*. At the same time as the mass conversion in Keng Tung, the appearance of another "messianic king" was reported (W. M. Young 1905a, 11). The slogan of the 1918 rebellion in Yunnan, "Our lord has appeared (*Women de zhuizi chulaile* 我們的主子出來了!)", is no doubt a direct translation of *jaw maw*. Later, in Burma in the 1970s, a Lahu man-god Maw na G'ui sha (Maw na pa, Maw na to bo) was reported to have been called *jaw maw* by his followers (Walker 1974, 704).

What these cases demonstrate is that the Lahu have never been conscious anarchists who chose to avoid kings and states. On the contrary, their subjective history abounds in stories of kings. They have had concepts of state and kingship of their own, and such notions are by no means alien to them. Indeed, in the broadest sense of the terms, sometimes they actually ran states and had kings of their own in the past.

The Lahu Myths of Statelessness Reconsidered

The fact that the subjective history of the Lahu overflows with stories of kings may seem inconsistent with another subjective history that focuses on their statelessness. Like other highlanders of Southeast Asia, the origin myth of the Lahu contains very rich texts that rationalize their statelessness. However, this manifestation of statelessness requires close scrutiny. Let us start by looking at this myth.

It relates that the god created heaven and earth and then created humans beside the lake of Naw sheh Naw law (or Naw law Naw sheh). The god gave the Lahu a seal of office

37) This will be discussed in the following subsection.

to rule the world and other ethnic groups became servants of the Lahu. The envious Tay (Shan) sent a beautiful servant girl to tempt the Lahu *jaw maw* with her costume and gestures.³⁸⁾ The *jaw maw* accidentally touched her breast and, as plotted, the Tay servant girl cried out and asked for the god's seal as compensation. Because she would accept nothing else, the Lahu *jaw maw* finally gave it to her. From that time onwards the Lahu lost their title and became subjects and servants of the Tay (Pun and Lewis 2002, 29–31; Kya leh 1994, 5).

According to the Lahu origin myth, the Lahu formerly ruled the entire world from their capital at Beijing/Nanjing.³⁹⁾ These cities were surrounded by walls. The Han Chinese were one of the subject ethnic groups ruled by Lahu *jaw maw*. At that time, the Lahu, armed with crossbows, possessed the strongest army. The Chinese had never been able to defeat them in battle, so they played a trick on the Lahu women. Attracted by the sound of Jew's harps, the Lahu women gave all the triggers of the crossbows to the Chinese while their husbands were away farming and hunting. Thus fully armed, the Chinese soldiers attacked the city. The Lahu men tried to fight back but found that their crossbows could not work. After losing the war, the Lahu left the capital city and took to the forest in search of a new country. They chased the tracks of a deer and eventually found a new place beside the lake of Naw sheh Naw law (Kya leh 1994, 10–11; Pun and Lewis 2002, 32–34).

They lived in harmony in the country of Naw sheh Naw law. Later, however, two groups among the Lahu quarrelled over the distribution of game. This quarrel divided the Lahu and 99 dissatisfied families left the country and moved south. The remaining 33 families tried to pursue the 99 families but could not catch up with them. Giving up the chase, the 33 families settled in a new country, Mvuh meh Mi meh (Kya leh 1994, 11–12; Pun and Lewis 2002, 34–36; Antisdell 1911, 33).⁴⁰⁾

The Han Chinese attacked Mvuh meh Mi meh. Eventually the Lahu lost their new

38) In the English version translated by Pun and Lewis (2002), "*jaw maw*" is translated as "ruler."

39) Peke Naje (Pun and Lewis 2002, 31) or Peu Cin Na Cin (Kya leh 1994, 10). Pun and Lewis comment that perhaps these terms refer to Beijing and Nanjing respectively. Kya leh's spelling looks closer to the original Chinese pronunciation (with Lahu accent) of Beijing-Nanjing. This interpretation contradicts an implicit assumption among Chinese ethnologists that these terms do not refer to Beijing and Nanjing but to old place names in Qinghai (Beiji 北基 and Nanji 南基) (Zhengxie Lancang Lahuzu Zizhixian Weiyuanhui 2003, 21). However, given their claim that the Lahu were once rulers of China, it would be meaningless if their capital were located in small villages in isolated Qinghai. It is most plausible that such views constitute a kind of "political decision" designed to minimize ethnic conflict in contemporary China. Ma (2008; 2009) also makes similar criticisms of this unrealistic political discourse that pinpoints Qinghai as the Lahu homeland.

40) Mvuh meh Mi meh is supposed to be an old Lahu name for present-day Lincang 臨滄 ("Lahuzu Jianshi" Bianxiezhu 1986, 26).

country and were forced to move further south. Some of them founded the Sha K'ai Shi country (Shang Gaixin, a former name for the hills of Shuangjiang county where Zhang Dengfa was based), but it was eliminated by Chinese troops when the British colonized Burma. Since then there have been no more Lahu *jaw maw* (Pun and Lewis 2002, 36–37). At first sight, these narratives seem to relate the prehistory of the Lahu. However, in reality, it is likely that these myths reflect the relatively recent political situation after the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Humans were first created at Naw sheh Naw law; later they also founded Naw sheh Naw law as a new country after having lost the war with the Chinese at Beijing/Nanjing. One possible interpretation is that the passages concerning Beijing/Nanjing area were later interpolated to the original version so that Naw sheh Naw law could be mentioned in the myth as a new country. The claim that Beijing/Nanjing was once the capital of the Lahu makes no sense until the incorporation of the Lahu hills into Chinese territory after the 1880–90s. Since the Lahu originally regarded themselves as non-subjects of the Chinese empire, there should have been no need for them to assert sovereignty over the Chinese capital.

Second, the concept of superior rulers granting seals of office to local chiefs as proof of their investiture reflects a formality associated with the Chinese empire's appointment of native officials (*tusi*). Chinese dynasties always issued seals of office to local indigenous leaders whom they appointed to administrate areas that the dynasty was incapable of ruling directly in pre-modern China. The Tay cawfaa of Mäng: Lam 猛朗 (present-day Lancang Ba 澜沧坝) where the Lahu live was incorporated into the native official system of the Qing dynasty during the late eighteenth century. The legend of the “lost seal” could be an imitation of administrative changes in the early modern period.

Third, in the former Lahu country, Mvuh meh Mi meh (present-day Lincang), direct administration by Qing dynasty was introduced during the middle of the eighteenth century, after which many Han Chinese migrated to southwest Yunnan (see above). Without the presence of Han immigrants, Han Chinese would never have been portrayed in the myth as rivals who threatened Lahu political autonomy. It is possible that the “loss of Mvuh meh Mi meh” corresponded to changes in the ethnoscape during the eighteenth century.

Consideration of these issues leads us to an alternative interpretation of the myths. According to their own accounts, the Lahu started to rationalize their notions of statelessness in relation to the Tay valley states and the Chinese bureaucracy no earlier than the eighteenth century. Their concepts of state, sovereignty, and power seem to have been inspired by the influx of migrant Han Chinese in the early modern period. Consciousness of “statelessness” itself emerged after the Lahu came under the administration of the

Chinese state.⁴¹⁾ Statelessness as an active ideology for the articulation of ethnic consciousness cannot predate the formation of a modern state with demarcated borderlines. If our understanding is correct, the Lahu were made stateless by the modern state itself.

“The Lost Book” and Political Power

If statelessness is not a timeless, quintessential attribute of the Lahu, then James Scott’s argument that their narratives of illiteracy served as “weapons of the weak”⁴²⁾ to avoid the state also becomes questionable. He argues that illiteracy (or “non-literacy” as he terms it) and myths of “the lost book” of the “Zomia” highlanders reflected a conscious strategy to keep their distance from lowland states (J. C. Scott 2009, 220–237). However, the Lahu case offers possibilities for a different interpretation of the myths.

The Lahu myth relates that the creator god once summoned representatives from all ethnic groups to receive books of his teachings. He gave the Lahu delegation rice cakes on which his teachings were inscribed. However, on their way home, the Lahu got hungry and ate all the rice cakes. That is why the Lahu, unlike the Tay and the Han Chinese who did not lose their books, do not possess their own writings (Antisdell 1911, 34; Pun and Lewis 2002, 24–25).

Some Lahu interpreted the myth to mean that they did not need to learn how to write. “Because the Lahu people had eaten God’s rice cakes, they have God’s word in their hearts. Just as the Lahu said then, even though they do not have writing, to this day God’s customs and words are in their hearts” (Pun and Lewis 2002, 25). In this interpretation, the Lahu are congenitally literate while the Tay and Chinese acquire literacy only through learning. Here the hierarchical order of literacy-illiteracy between valley dwellers and highlanders is reversed. Highlanders can use the myth of “the lost book” as an antithesis to the established authority of lowland states.

However, in another interpretation, the myth of “the lost book” provides a strong basis for messianic prophecy. Antisdell (1911, 34) reported:

There is a prophecy among the Lahoos (Lahu) that their brethren of the ninety-nine families will some day return to them and when they do will bring the written precepts of God which the Lahoos once had. Tradition says God wrote his precepts on rice cakes and gave them to the people, but they became very hungry and ate the rice cakes. The Akhas and Was (Karens also)

41) Ma (2004; 2008; 2009) also argues that the Lahu ethnic consciousness has been formulated in the process of modern state formation, and that their narrative of their own countries in former days has been reinterpreted via the reconstruction and manipulation of origin myths.

42) “Weapons of the weak” is a keyword of his previous work (1985), and this theme is latently repeated in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009).

have similar traditions except that the writings were on buffalo skins, but when the people were hungry these were cooked and eaten.

They, as well as the Lahoos, expect a return of lost brethren, who will not only bring back the lost writings, but will restore them to political supremacy.

As founder of the Lahu messianic movements, San Fo Zu is thought to have been the man who uttered the prophecy mentioned above. According to the history of the Lahu Christian church, San Fo Zu is reported to have made the following prediction:

[W]hen the time is fulfilled, God will search for us and will enter our homes. There is a sign and when it appears, we will know that God is coming. The sign is that white people on white horses will bring us the Scripture of God. (Saw Aung Din and Sowards 1963, 409)

The Lahu church historian Yo han refers to this prophecy in his version of Lahu church history. His version offers the terms “*chaw hpu*” and “*mvuh hpu* (white book)” as the Lahu translation of “white people” and “the Scripture of God” (Yo han 1976, 5). Here the term *hpu* (white) is an adjective that stresses sacredness, so it is questionable whether “white men” and “white book” originally denoted Westerners and the Bible.

When the American Baptist missionary William M. Young started his evangelical work in Keng Tung in 1901, the Lahu regarded him as the “white man” of the prophecy who was bringing God’s precepts (“white book”) back to them. His arrival started a mass conversion movement in 1904 in Keng Tung, and the movement soon spread across the border into China at an increasingly fast pace (Saw Aung Din and Sowards 1963, 410–411). William Young noted that the belief in “the lost book” underlay the enthusiasm for the messianic movement at that time: “[t]he belief seems well-nigh universal among them that the foreigner would bring them the knowledge of the true God, and there is an intense longing on the part of many for such a revelation” (W.M. Young 1905b). The word “foreigner” here was most probably a translation (somewhat exaggerated) of the Lahu term for white people—*chaw hpu*.

William Young was originally trained for missionary work amongst the Tay (Shan). He was fluent in the Tay (Shan) language and, quite naturally, he knew no Lahu. In missionary correspondences he repeatedly complained that he had some difficulty in communicating with the Lahu, for every time he received delegations of the Lahu he had to find somebody who could translate his Tay into Lahu. Of course, “the white books” that he brought were not written in Lahu but Tay translations of gospels and tracts. Christian missionaries developed romanized Lahu script for Bible translation later. In 1907, Tilbe, a Baptist missionary, invented a romanization system for Lahu, which was used in some pamphlets, catechism, and hymns (Anonymous 1907, 5). Later, in 1932, Po Tun and

Telford completed a translation of the New Testament (Saw Aung Din and Sowards 1963, 414). The invention of a romanization system and the translation of the Bible into Lahu started only after the mass conversions of 1904. Therefore the Lahu could not have had a writing system during the initial period of mass conversion.

Nicholas Tapp (1989) generalized that messianic mass conversion to Christianity was inspired by the widely shared myth of “the lost book” among the highlanders (Miao, Karen, etc.) of mainland Southeast Asia, and hypothesized that conversions were motivated by a “desire for literacy.” Literacy in this context refers to translations of the Bible and other texts written in scripts of their own languages. However, his hypothesis cannot be sustained when we consider the fact that in each case, mass conversion occurred before the translation of the Bible.⁴³⁾ Actually, the Bibles distributed by the missionaries were not written in the languages of the highlanders, but in the scripts of dominant lowlanders—Chinese for the Miao and Burmese for the Karen. Nevertheless, these Bibles were regarded as evidence that the prophecies concerning the return of “the lost book” had been fulfilled. The Lahu case was by no means an exception. The Bible that they received was not written in Lahu but in the Tay language.

What then was the real motivation behind their desire to redeem “the lost book”? William Young mentions some interesting attitudes that the Lahu displayed toward written texts. In a correspondence dated November 5, 1904, he wrote of Lahu “teachers (or travelling evangelists)”:

These Muhso (Lahu) teachers have a wonderful influence over the people. They cannot read, they carry certain papers covered with Heiroglyphic⁴⁴⁾ marks that they do not understand the meaning of themselves. I think it quite probable that some of their head teachers in China could interpret these peculiar papers and give some meaning to everything.⁴⁵⁾

Apparently “teacher” in this context denotes prophets of the cult of San Fo Zu’s messianic movement. It is quite probable that the term “Heiroglyphic” refers to Chinese characters. These illiterate religious specialists carried mysterious texts written in the language of another ethnic group around with them. These texts seem to have been highly valued even though the owners could not read them. In another correspondence William Young commented:

43) The first Miao and Karen scripts were developed by the missionaries in 1917 (Pollard 1919, 173) and 1832 (U Zan and Sowards 1963, 312) respectively. In both cases the conversion movements preceded the invention of the scripts.

44) This should be “Hieroglyphic.”

45) W.M. Young to T.S. Barbour, Nov. 5, 1904.

The Muhso tradition regarding the lost Book and their longing for the Foreigner to bring them the true Law makes it possible for us to use tracts and Gospels to great advantage even where the people cannot read. Many Muhso believe that their language was a written language. Some claim that there are books still extant. They brought me a book some time ago that they hoped might be such a book but it turned out to be a Chinese book on Astrology and evil spirit worship⁴⁶⁾

Again, “foreigner” in his context corresponds to the “white people (*chaw hpu*)” mentioned in the original prophecy. He goes on to say:

We send out tracts and Gospels to the Villagers and they receive them at once as the fulfillment of their traditions. I have sent out hundreds of Gospels and some thousands of tracts. It is somewhat amusing to see a group coming in 15 or 20 days journey and unfold a tract or Gospel that has been guarded with scrupulous care. Wherever they receive those tracts and Gospels they are anxious to come to us at once. The literature has reached far over into China. Wherever they have received the literature it gives us a sort of “Squatter sovereignty right to the territory.”⁴⁷⁾

William Young clearly stated that the tracts and gospels in Tay were not read by the receivers. Rather, written scriptures themselves were revered as objects of worship, and the receivers of such texts treated them as if they were some kind of amulet. As already noted above, “squatter sovereignty” could be a translation of *jaw maw* or king. This demonstrates that the Lahu conceived of the texts as objectifications of supernatural power, and that they regarded people with such power as entitled to be invested as kings. Messianic movements to redeem “the lost book” are not an anarchist’s antithesis to the state but a unique manifestation of state and power, especially charismatic kingship. In other words, we can interpret Lahu mythical accounts as articulating a deep-felt longing to possess their own state and king, rather than indicating a desire to reject them.

V Conclusion

As documented by Qing officials in the early nineteenth century, the Lahu were once notorious for their refusal to submit to imperial rule. This does not, however, mean that they enjoyed complete freedom from state control. Their struggle since the eighteenth century shows their efforts to establish their own state, and indeed they sometimes succeeded in their endeavors. Nonetheless, their polities or states were ultimately eliminated and incorporated into modern nation states with demarcated borderlines. In this sense, the Lahu became stateless and conscious of the loss of their own state only after

46) W.M. Young to T.S. Barbour, Apr. 4, 1905.

47) *ibid.*

the process of modern state formation began.

Actually the Lahu had formulated their unique concepts of state and kingship over the course of their history. These concepts have not been considered seriously by scholars because they are so radically different from conventional understanding of state and kingship.⁴⁸⁾ Invisibility of Lahu states and kings in previous academic works is due to our inability to identify them, rather than because the Lahu rejected such notions themselves.

Ironically James Scott's argument, which is clearly on the side of anti-state anarchism, echoes the assessment by Cen Yuying, the late nineteenth-century governor-general of Yunnan and Guizhou. Both men view the history of the Lahu as one of "endless rebellion," and both fail to recognize the concept of state and kingship that underpinned "rebellions" by highlanders.

The Lahu oral tradition has extremely rich texts that justify their statelessness. The lost kings, the lost countries, and "the lost book" are different versions of the same theme. Nevertheless, what these narratives stress is that in the past, the Lahu owned their states, and that by no means do they negate the notion of a state or want to avoid living in their own state. "The lost book" narrated in their messianic movements has been interpreted as a manifestation of their anarchist tendencies. On the contrary, the reality of their behavior at the time of the mass conversions clearly demonstrates their original concept of, and longing for, an ideal king.

At first glance the history of the Lahu seems to be that of a typically stateless people in the James Scott's sense of the term. However, a close reading of the narrative of their history and mythical accounts leads us to quite a different conclusion:⁴⁹⁾ what is really missing is an adequate framework for the understanding of their indigenous concepts of state, kingship, and power. The Lahu appear to be an essentially stateless people simply because our conceptual tools for the comprehension of the "inside view" of marginalized ethnic groups are far from adequate at present.

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48) In his argument on early state formation in Southeast Asia, Wolters (1982, 12–14) criticizes the tendency of previous scholars to overlook small-scale native state formation because of a bias toward Western or Chinese state models. Unfortunately, however, he omits the mainland Southeast Asian massif from his hypothesis (*ibid.*, 32).

49) Although J. Scott has exaggerated the statelessness of the "Zomia" people in his book, I agree with some points in his argument, namely that: 1) "Zomia" peoples' religious belief and mythical accounts reflect the theodicy of their history of deprivation; and 2) the ultimate goal of millenarianism of the "Zomia" people could be the total negation of any form of state-like social hierarchy, rather than their own state-building. For details of my argument on this point, see Kataoka (2007).

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